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movies BY LOIS WADSWORTH



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A Mutant Icon

For our time.

HULK: Directed by Ang Lee. Written by John Turman, Michael France, James Schamus, based on story by James Schamus and the Marvel comic book character created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. Produced by Gale Anne Hurd, Avi Arad, James Schamus, Larry Franco. Executive producers, Stan Lee, Kevin Feige. Starring Eric Bana and Jennifer Connelly, with Sam Elliott, Josh Lucas and Nick Nolte. Universal Pictures, 2003. PG-13. 138 minutes.

Ang Lee has made an interesting, psychologically nuanced film from the comic book hero formerly known as The Incredible Hulk. Not as lovable as Spidey, Hulk is perhaps too much of a good thing. That is, when repressed scientist Bruce Banner (Eric Bana) morphs into Hulk, he does not just get mad, he plunges straight into a fiery, blind rage from hell. The angrier he becomes, the more the rage controls him, down to how tall and heavy he is.

In a lighter vein, when Hulk's first getting into the rhythm of his leaping thing, he takes smaller hops, say from one side of town to the other. But later as he swells to gigantic proportions, he leaps entire mountains. I particularly like the way he pushes off when he makes a stupendous jump.

Enough about Hulk. What about the humans around him? They are a varied bunch. There's Bruce's former girlfriend and lab partner Betty (Jennifer Connelly). She's as smart as he is, and the work they're doing is about to take a giant leap itself. They are nearly there with a genetic fix-it that would allow the body to heal itself from inside.

You see how this works? Every time I try to talk about any of the movie in terms of ordinary reality, the plot goes to the moon and back. This is what comes of mixing concrete reality with weird science, monster mythology, the narrative journey of the hero, repressed memories and romance. And I like it. It challenges the viewer in ways most superhero flicks never imagine.

I actually enjoy the long set-up, in which the characters' troubled relationships with their fathers is explored. Bruce's father and mother are dead, he tells Betty. But as she learns, from her own father, no less, that's not true. Her father (Sam Elliott) was the military officer who took Bruce's dad (Nick Nolte) into custody when he went over the edge at the time of Bruce's moth-

er's death. Now Bruce is invaded by images and partial memories that point him toward some dark secret. He's terrified and doesn't know why.

Betty's story is more ordinary: Her father is a distant, career-driven authority figure. But even as her long-term scientific project is about to pay off, here he comes, trying to control her life again. The gulf between them widens, then closes as the weirdness inherent in the plot pile up and pull them and the rest of reality into smash-'em, bash-'em comic book panels of supernatural powers, explosive accidents, radiation mutations and grandiose, King-Kong-like antics.

Before the whole enterprise heads south, the film's best action scene takes place when Bruce morphs into Hulk deliberately. He tries to save Betty from a trio of mad, mutant dogs sent by his deranged father to kill her. Even Hulk is nearly undone by these fierce, unnatural beasts, and when one of them smashes through the windshield of the car Betty is hiding in, I could hardly breathe.

Well, it's all helicopters, tanks and Army guys from then on. Military dad is not about to stand around and have this half-baked Hulk put his daughter in danger. But when it turns out that she is the only person who can help Bruce snap out of his destructive persona, dad has to think again.

Here's what I think. Hulk really lives in all of us now. With the ongoing war and terrorist operations around the world since 9/11, we've been carrying some extra internal baggage. When all the agents of government and culture conspire to whip up war fever, and the country goes to war, how do you wind down? How do warriors return to ordinary life? We know from veterans of former wars that it's not easy. It's now our task to transform the madness we internalized via television's images and words into something less destructive to ourselves, our neighbors, our country. Before, like Hulk, we blow up the world.

Hulk is now playing at Cinema World and Cinemark. It's an entertaining conundrum; highly recommended.

EW

Here's what I think. Hulk really lives in all of us now.



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